

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 1A13THE WASHINGTON POST  
31 January 1980

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# Official Foretold Iranian Retaliation

By an irony of fate, the man who forecast most clearly the frustrating dilemma of the Iranian crisis was himself caught in the middle of it. He is Bruce Laingen, the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Tehran who was taken into "protective custody" at the Iranian Foreign Office the day our embassy was seized by radical militants.

The 57-year old diplomat arrived in the Iranian capital only last June. But it didn't take him long to size up the situation with remarkable perception.

Nor did it take long for Washington to start peppering Laingen with disturbing cables about the possibility that the exiled shah would be given sanctuary in the United States. On July 26, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance cabled Laingen: "I would like to have your personal and private evaluation of the effect of such a move on the safety of Americans in Iran, especially the official Americans in the compound."

Laingen promptly replied that admission of the shah to the United States would undoubtedly touch off anti-American retaliation, including action against the embassy, which he noted was poorly secured against attack.

On Aug. 2, an even more disturbing cable arrived from Henry Precht, head of the Iranian desk in Foggy Bottom. His use of the peculiar, telltale phrase, "when the decision is made to admit the shah," indicated that the decision was no longer in doubt — only the timing of its announcement. Precht suggested a plan for counteracting the anti-American outburst Laingen had predicted would follow the shah's entry.

First, Laingen counseled against letting the shah in. Then he laid out his reasons in a penetrating, 1,000-word

analysis of the Iranian character that proved to be an incredibly accurate prediction of subsequent events. Basically, Laingen told his superiors in Washington that the Iranians were impossible to negotiate with.

Noting his difficulties in dealing with Iranians, Laingen said, "Underlying cultural and psychological qualities that account for the nature of these difficulties are and will remain relatively constant."

He explained: "The single dominant aspect of the Persian psyche is [perhaps] an overriding egoism. Its antecedents lie in the long Iranian history of instability, which put a premium on self-preservation."

The result is "an almost total Persian preoccupation with self [that] leaves little room for understanding points of view other than one's own," Laingen cabled, adding: "Thus, for example, it is incomprehensible to an Iranian that U.S. immigration law may prohibit him a tourist visa when he has determined that he wants to live in California."

The Iranians' "unease about the nature of the world in which one lives" has led to a certain paranoia, Laingen indicated. "The Persian experience has been that nothing is permanent and it is commonly perceived that hostile forces abound," he wrote. "In such an environment, each individual must be constantly alert for opportunities to protect himself against the malevolent forces that would otherwise be his undoing."

This every-man-for-himself "bazaar mentality," Laingen cabled, produces a "mind-set that often ignores longer term interests in favor of immediately obtainable advantages, and countenances practices that are regarded as unethical by other norms."

These psychological quirks, added to the Iranians' faith in the omnipotence of God, blind even Western-educated Iranians to the interrelation of events, Laingen wrote. He noted, for example, that Ibrahim Yagdi, then the Iranian foreign minister, was "resisting the idea that Iranian behavior has consequences on the perception of Iran in the U.S., or that this perception is somehow related to American policies regarding Iran."

Other Iranian character traits Laingen noted were "an aversion to accepting responsibility for one's own actions . . . a proclivity for assuming that to say something is to do it . . . [and] the Persian concepts of influence and obligation."

Iranians "are consumed with developing *parti bazi* — the influence that will help get things done — while favors are only grudgingly bestowed and then just to the extent that a tangible quid pro quo is immediately perceptible."

Finally, Laingen warned that "one should never assume his side of the issue will be recognized, let alone that it will be conceded to have merits."

Unfortunately for Laingen, the other American hostages and the United States as a whole, Jimmy Carter and his policy advisers chose to ignore the prescient warnings of their expert on the scene. Meanwhile, events in Tehran have unfolded precisely the way Laingen predicted they would.

Footnote: Sources told my associate Dale Van Atta that Laingen, like a front-line soldier who winds up paying with his neck when his advice is brushed off by the brass; has refrained from remonstrating with his superiors in Foggy Bottom. The least he might say, in all fairness, is "I told you so."